

Little Terrors:
The Child Antagonist in the Horror Film

by

Dominic Lennard, B.A. (Hons)

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University of Tasmania
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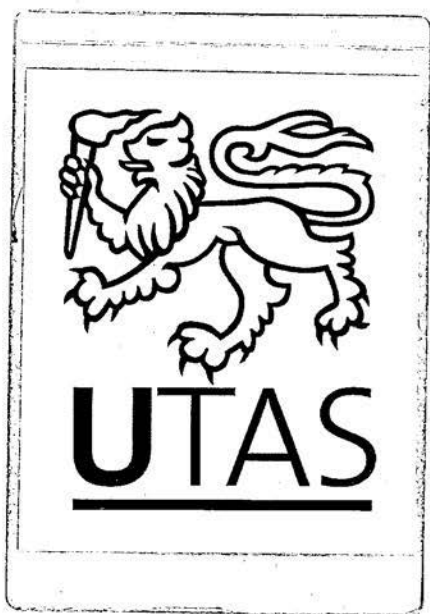
ABSTRACT

Since the 1950s children have proven to be among the most effective and enduring antagonists in the popular horror film, beginning with Rhoda Penmark (Patty McCormack) of *The Bad Seed* (1956) and the space-invader infants of *Village of the Damned* (1960), and progressing to the possessed child (Linda Blair) of *The Exorcist* (1973) and, more recently, the psychic ghost-girl Samara (Daveigh Chase) of *The Ring* (2002). Using theoretical approaches adopted from Marxism, feminism, film theory and cultural studies, this thesis analyses representations of the “child antagonist” in the horror film across the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

In contrast with the traditionally innocent characterisations of the child in Western film and literature, the child antagonist brings to the surface the complexities and contradictions underlying the apparently harmless meanings readily attributed to the child. This thesis identifies the social and cinematic discourses in which the horror film situates children. In particular, it demonstrates that the portrayal and behaviour of child antagonists enables theorisation of the key discourses that construct popular understandings of childhood, including innocence, class, gender, sexuality, consumer culture, and parenting. Readings of *The Bad Seed* and *Village of the Damned* discuss the use of child antagonists as representatives of class conflict; an examination of *It's Alive* (1974) considers monstrous offspring as reflections of paternal masculinity; discussions of *The Brood* (1979) and *The Ring* demonstrate the child antagonist's grounding in ideas of motherhood; an analysis of *Alien* (1979) considers the film's creature as a manifestation of anxieties about reproductive technologies; and a chapter on *Hard Candy* (2005) addresses the evolution of the child antagonist in light of contemporary panic over paedophilia. These analyses emphasise the unconscious symbolic value of the figure of the child, and the crises provoked when that symbolism is subverted.

Representations of children in popular film are of great cultural and political significance because of their capacity to reflect and influence public perceptions. The

unique prevalence of the child antagonist in the horror film, along with the exclusion of children as viewers, renders the genre perhaps the primary domain for the examination of those representations. Through investigation of the child antagonist in horror, this thesis seeks to construct a clearer view of the cultural conceptualisation of “childhood,” and the role of horror in charting the relationship between children and adults.



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